



# Research & Policy Brief Series

ISSUE NUMBER 32/NOVEMBER 2009

## How schools can help communities in NYS \*

By John W. Sipple, Hope Casto, and Robin M. Blakely, Cornell University

### What is the issue?

Schools play multiple roles in communities of all sizes. Schools not only meet a community's educational needs, but they provide employment, social, cultural, and recreational opportunities for residents<sup>1</sup>. In the smallest and most remote communities, schools are often considered *the* civic institution and quite possibly the only economically viable institution in town. However, with the current budget crisis in New York State, school districts - particularly smaller districts in rural areas - face increased pressure to achieve cost savings through shared services and consolidation. Such constraints may affect the ability of these schools to serve their multiple roles and important functions in their local communities. Conversely, there may be opportunities for smaller school districts to weather the storm if those roles and the interests of local residents are better understood in cost/benefit calculations. Are New Yorkers satisfied with the public education in their communities? How can local schools best help their community? What additional services could schools offer to help their local community?

To better understand these issues, we analyze data from 1,100 respondents to the 2009 Empire State Poll and CaRDI Rural Survey, telephone surveys conducted by the Survey Research Institute at Cornell University. We examine responses to a series of questions about public schools in New York State communities, comparing answers among downstate urban, upstate urban, and rural New York State respondents.

### Satisfaction with local schools

We begin by asking about the general level of satisfaction with the public schools in local communities. Respondents were asked the question: "Thinking about availability, cost, quality and any other considerations important to

**Figure 1:** How satisfied are you with the public education in your community?

	NYS Total	Downstate Urban	Upstate Urban	Rural
Dissatisfied	24.6%	29.6%	17.2%	16.4%
Neutral	14.0%	14.7%	15.3%	10.6%
Satisfied	61.3%	55.7%	67.5%	72.9%

Source: 2009 Empire State Poll and CaRDI Rural Survey, Cornell University

you, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the public education in your community?" More than half (61.3 percent) of New Yorkers report being satisfied with the public education in their communities, but this varies dramatically across the state. Downstate urbanites report the lowest levels of satisfaction (55.7 percent) while rural New Yorkers are the most satisfied (72.9 percent), a 17 point difference.

### How schools help communities

Survey respondents were also asked the following question: "Local communities can be helped/served/supported in many ways by their local school districts. How can your local school district best help your local community?" Of the three choices offered, the majority of New Yorkers feel that their local school district can best help their community by better preparing students for college (60.3 percent), although this figure varies across the state (see Figure 2). Two-thirds of downstate urbanites hold this view, as well as over half of their upstate urban counterparts. Less than half (46.4 percent) of rural New Yorkers agree, a 20 point difference from downstate urbanites. Rural respondents were more likely than their urban counterparts to view schools' as most helpful when they better prepare students for local employment. About a quarter of rural and upstate urbanites felt that their local school district was already helping and did not need to do anything differently, compared to only about one out of seven downstate urbanites who felt this way.

<sup>1</sup>Lyson, Thomas A. 2002. "What does a school mean to a community? Assessing the social and economic benefits of schools to rural villages in New York." *Journal of Research in Rural Education* 17:131-137.

**Figure 2:** How can your local school district best help your local community?

	NYS Total	Downstate Urban	Upstate Urban	Rural
Better preparing students for college	60.3%	66.7%	52.2%	46.4%
Better preparing students for local employment	20.4%	18.5%	20.7%	28.4%
Not doing anything different (already helping)	19.2%	14.8%	27.1%	25.2%

Source: 2009 Empire State Poll and CaRDI Rural Survey, Cornell University

### What additional services can schools offer?

When asked what other services school districts could offer that would better serve their local communities, about half of New Yorkers identified pre-school and healthcare services as the most helpful (see Figure 3). Among upstate urban respondents, pre-school services were more frequently cited, while among rural respondents healthcare services appeared to be more important<sup>2</sup>. Rural New Yorkers were most likely to feel that local school districts would best help their community by remaining the same.

**Figure 3:** Among the following choices that could be offered by your local school district, which one would best help your community?

	NYS Total	Downstate Urban	Upstate Urban	Rural
Pre-school services	27.7%	29.4%	28.0%	20.2%
Healthcare services	25.5%	27.2%	20.4%	26.9%
Services for children from immigrant families	6.4%	7.9%	3.3%	4.9%
Services for parents	14.6%	15.6%	14.7%	11.7%
Stayed the same	16.6%	14.3%	19.9%	21.5%
None of these	9.3%	5.6%	13.7%	14.8%

Source: 2009 Empire State Poll and CaRDI Rural Survey, Cornell University

### Discussion and Policy Implications

The majority of New Yorkers are satisfied with the public education in their community and see their local schools as most helpful in preparing students for college.

In addition, a significant share of respondent feel that local school districts could best help their community by offering pre-school and healthcare services. However, some distinct differences emerge between rural and urban views of local schools.

Rural residents were more focused on the need for schools to prepare students for local employment rather than for college, and were least likely to report that pre-school services would be helpful to their local community. Rural residents may be more focused on the immediate need for jobs, local economic development, and access to healthcare, and hence less focused on the longer-term investments of pre-school and college educations, particularly as a significant share of those students who leave the rural community for college do not return. This may serve to undercut long-term economic stability – intentional or otherwise – but also captures the catch-22 of many rural communities.

Upstate New Yorkers (rural and urban) are also more satisfied than their downstate counterparts with the current services that schools offer in their community. While this signals a degree of satisfaction with the *current* educational system, it may also signal an increasing isolation of the rural communities (and their children) from the pathway to greater economic and social success.

It is clear from these findings that schools have the potential to provide more than educational services for children in a community, and that many New Yorkers view these services in a positive light. In mid-October, New York Governor David Paterson outlined his plan to reduce the state budget deficit by \$3 billion, a plan which includes significant midyear cuts to NYS school districts (including school-based health centers) and municipalities. These cuts further reinforce the need for school districts and municipalities to partner on providing key community services. Rural people are the most satisfied with the public education in their communities, and many do not want to see changes in what their schools offer. Ironically, however, in the current economic, social and political environment it is small rural schools that may face the greatest pressure to change<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>2</sup>This issue is a joint publication between CaRDI and the New York State Center for Rural Schools (<http://www.ny ruralschools.org>).

<sup>3</sup>See the CaRDI publication on "School Consolidation: What do New Yorkers Think?" at: <http://devsoc.cals.cornell.edu/cals/devsoc/outreach/cardi/publications/upload/11-2009-RNYM.pdf>

